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SUBJECT: NEW GOVERNMENT OF TURKMENISTAN REBUKES RUSSIA FOR
"PROVOCATION"

REFERENCE: ASHGABAT 1311

Summary

¶1. (U) Turkmenistan's Minister of Foreign Affairs on December 28 publicly denounced the Russian media for assertions that the recently announced February 11 election was a farce and that state services have broken down because of a power vacuum following Niyazov's death. Local media continues to reinforce reverence for Niyazov, as well as preparations for the February 11 presidential elections. End Summary.

HALK MASLAHATY SESSION STRESSES STABILITY

¶2. (U) The Halk Maslahaty session of December 26 was four hours of well-intentioned, though quaintly orchestrated, theater, aimed mostly at foreign consumption. A succession of speakers, including Foreign Minister Rashit Meredov, Acting President Gurbanguly Berdimuhammedov, and Elections Committee head Murat Garryev stressed stability and urged the seamless continuation of Niyazov's policies. The tedious nominations process ended with the expected nomination of Berdimuhammedov, followed by Garryev's and Meredov's appeal to "follow the law, even though we already know who we want to be our president." Several times during the session, state television panned over the faces of the diplomatic corps, and took pull-aside interviews during the session with select heads of missions. State television aired in full a statement in English, with largely accurate Russian voice-over, by Charge, in which she reiterated U.S. condolences over the loss of President Niyazov, U.S. hopes for a new relationship and for a peaceful and democratic transition of power.

Foreign Ministry Rebukes Russian Media

¶3. (U) Foreign press reacted swiftly and negatively to the December 26 meeting, particularly the constitutional changes granting the Interim President the right to run in elections, and the staged endorsement of Berdimuhammedov for the presidency. Russian press carried interviews with members of the opposition, including threats of a coup by Kyiv-based opposition leaders when it was clear that the opposition would play no role in the election. (Note: Since 2003, the constitution of Turkmenistan has required that aspiring presidential candidates be resident in Turkmenistan for 10 years prior to nomination -- a fact the opposition has not contested in the past. This requirement bars any of the expatriate opposition leadership from running in the February 11 election. End Note.) Russian political analysts also suggested that Akmyrad Rejepov, the head of the Presidential Security Forces, held the upper hand in

behind the scenes political maneuvering in Ashgabat.

¶4. (U) On December 28, Turkmen State Television went to the unusual step of airing Foreign Minister Rashit Meredov making a statement, read in Russian and Turkmen, rebuking Russia for "the insulting statements and articles of the so-called political scientists on the alleged military coup in Turkmenistan and illegitimate transfer of power" and for allowing its media to print "explicitly provocative reports." The statement, printed in the December 29 editions of major dailies Neutral Turkmenistan and Turkmenistan, went on: "The situation all over the country is calm and stable. All enterprises and organizations are functioning normally. The population of the country is provided with food, medicines and other necessary conditions for normal life. The welfare payments, salaries and pensions are being paid in full and on time, and social service is available to all." According to Interfax, Turkmenistan's Ambassador to Russia delivered that message to the Russian Foreign Ministry on December 28 in a meeting between Turkmenistan's Ambassador to Russian and the Russian Deputy Foreign Minister. Turkmenistan's Ambassador emphasized that the criticism was directed at Russian media: "some Russian outlets are not objective in covering the events in today's Turkmenistan, they manifestly violate norms of journalistic ethics commenting on moments concerning the private lives of Turkmen leaders." Interfax and Itar-Tass carried the conciliatory response from the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs that Russia was a "reliable friend" of Turkmenistan, and that Russian media does not reflect the official views of the Russian government.

¶5. (U) The local stringer for Itar-Tass played down the the statement, saying it had been prepared prior to the December 26 Halk Maslahaty session and that it mirrored messages delivered to individual journalists and the Russian government during Niyazov's reign. However, this was the first time such a rebuke appeared in

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Turkmenistan's state press. The local stringer for Agence France Presse told PD FSN that the statement was inevitable; a lack of response would indicate weakness on the part of the Government of Turkmenistan.

Some Criticize USG as "passive"

¶6. (U) Although most U.S. media outlets reported the events of the Halk Maslahaty accurately, a couple of outlets printed stories accusing Washington of inaction over -- or complicity in -- Turkmenistan's flawed electoral process. The Florida-based Online Journal ran the story "Washington's Game in Turkmenistan," in which the author wildly speculated about the USG's role in engineering Niyazov's death in order to consolidate control over the region's energy supplies. The Washington Post ran a story by Peter Finn reiterating opposition leader Khudaiberdy Orazov's complaints over Western passivity: "The E.U. and the United States imposed sanctions on Belarus after flawed presidential elections there last year. Turkmenistan, which is rich in natural gas and offers a potential alternative to supplies from Russia, has escaped that kind of collective action."

¶7. (U) Coverage of the United States' December 27 statement in support for a free and fair election was scant, but Voice of America summarized the statement and and stated that the U.S. was avoiding direct criticism of the elections process.

Comment

¶8. (U) International media coverage of the December 26 Halk Maslahaty session and news of a February 11 presidential election was relatively accurate but Russian media provided conspicuously heavy coverage of conspiracy theories and reprinted inflammatory statements by members of Turkmenistan's exiled opposition groups. Turkmenistan's public criticism of Russia was significant and a positive sign; though the new government cannot afford to alienate the main customer for Turkmenistan's gas. End Comment.

